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SUBJECT: PROTESTS, SPORADIC VIOLENCE CONTINUE ACROSS SOUTH CENTRAL;
SADRISTS PREACH CALM, PROTECT BABIL SUNNI SHRINE

REF: A) HILLAH 0028 B) HILLAH 0026

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11. (SBU) Summary: Protests continued across Wasit and Babil Provinces in South Central Iraq for a second and third day after the bombing of Al-Askariyah mosque in Samarra. In Wasit, Shi'a Islamists of all affiliations joined a massive demonstration February 23. The next day, Sadrists mosque preachers called for calm. Diwaniyah Sadrists called for their followers to mobilize to protect Samarra. In Babil, a tightly-enforced curfew did not prevent additional protests on February 23 and 24, and police reported apparently sectarian killings. Babil mosques generally preached restraint, and Sadrists reportedly offered to protect a Sunni mosque in Al-Hillah. End summary.

TWO BABIL SUNNIS REPORTED DEAD; SADRISTS PRAY WITH SUNNIS

12. (SBU) Protests Thursday, February 23 again coursed through Al-Hillah, breaking up in the late afternoon just before the imposition of a curfew that was to begin at 6 p.m. Babil officials described the protest as peaceful, and estimated the crowd to be about 3,000. Three mortars were reportedly fired at the demonstrators, missing the protest and instead striking a nearby house, injuring a woman and two children. Local contacts reported that two Sunnis were killed late on February 23, increasing the total known dead in Babil to three so far in the wake of the Al-Askariyah bombing.

13. (SBU) A curfew prohibiting car traffic on Al-Hillah's streets remained in effect through Friday, February 24, although traffic reportedly moved freely outside the city. Local staff reported seeing a very large number of Sadrists dressed in black preparing to board as many as thirty buses bound for Kufa, Najaf Province, the site of one of Moqtada Al-Sadr's main offices and an affiliated mosque. Local staff also reported convoys from Mahaweel, in Northern Babil Province, traveling through Babil on the main road to Najaf. Local staff said that the convoys could have been heading towards Najaf, or to the Imam Zaid Bin Ali Shrine near Kifl, Babil Province. (Note: February 24 marks a day of pilgrimage to the Zaid bin Ali Shrine for Shi'a Muslims. End note.) The convoys bore banners and pictures of Moqtada Al-Sadr. Passengers were chanting, "Down, down, America, down, down, Israel" as the convoy passed by the Regional Embassy Office. Later on February 24, protesters estimated at more than 5,000 marched through Al-Hillah chanting for the dismissal of U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad.

14. (SBU) Local contacts reported Sadrists imams preaching self-control and restraint during Friday prayers, urging worshippers not to be driven into sectarian strife because that is the goal of the terrorists. Sadrists were also reported to

have joined Sunnis in prayer. According to a local official, Babil Governor Saleh Saleh Mehdi Al-Muslimawi had sent word to a Sunni mosque in Al-Hillah asking them to cancel their Friday prayers for their own safety. Hearing of this, the Sadrists reportedly sent a delegation to the Sunni shrine, convinced the Sunnis to hold their services under Sadrist protection, and even joined in the Sunni rites.

THURSDAY ANGER YIELDS TO FRIDAY CALLS FOR PEACE IN WASIT

15. (SBU) A large crowd, representing the full range of Shi'a Islamists and estimated in the thousands, converged on the main Sadrist mosque in Al-Kut Thursday, February 23. The demonstrators marched peacefully to the main courtyard of the Wasit Governorate Center building, where they were received by Provincial Council members, some of whom are Sadrists, Wasit Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) Chairman Ahmed Al-Hakim and a representative of the Sistani office in Al-Kut. Sistani's instructions calling for demonstrations were read to the crowd. After a speech by former Provincial Council Chairman Majed Ali Askar calling for the withdrawal of Coalition Forces, the crowd chanted "No! No! America! No! No! Israel!" Many in the crowd also called for violence and retribution against Sunnis and their leaders, including Saleh Mutlaq and Adnan Al-Dulaimi. The demonstration was patrolled by Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police forces. A banner in front of the Sadrist office in Al-Kut read, "The explosion that damaged the holy shrine in Samarra is the result of a coalition between the United States and terrorist Sunni political leaders."

16. (SBU) Thursday's violent rhetoric apparently gave way to restraint by Friday, February 24. At the main Sadrist mosque in Al-Kut, Wasit Sadrist Head Modhafer Al-Musawi appealed for calm. Reading a statement reportedly from Moqtada Al-Sadr, Al-Musawi described the mosque bombings in Samarra as an act designed to split the brotherhood of Islam and Muslims in Iraq. Musawi, further relating the statement of Al-Sadr, demanded that a

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committee of Sunni and Shi'a be formed to investigate the incident, and that religious leaders sign an "honor pact" to leave important Sunni and Shi'a sites unharmed. At a Sunni Mosque in Al-Kut, a small crowd of approximately 50 worshippers gathered for Friday morning prayers. The imam appealed for unity and brotherhood between all Muslims of Iraq.

SADRIST, SISTANI MOSQUES OFFER DIVERGENT INSTRUCTIONS

17. (SBU) In Diwaniyah, stores and government offices were closed February 23, and no protests or demonstrations were reported. The next day, Shi'a mosques offered divergent guidance. A local journalist reported that in mosques affiliated with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, preachers called for calm. In contrast, Sadrist mosques offered "incendiary" sermons, and urged worshippers to travel to Samarra to protect the religious sites there.

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